

U.S. Embassy to Azerbaijan

Ambassador Richard Morningstar

Remarks (As Prepared)

US-Azerbaijan: Vision for the Future Conference

Willard Hotel, Washington DC

April 30, 2014

Thank you. I am happy to be here to speak to you today. I am going to be very direct. The relationship between the United States and Azerbaijan is very important and strong, but it is not trouble-free. I will talk about why the relationship is important as well as the issues we have, principally in the democracy area.

Events in Ukraine demonstrate the importance of the relationship. Ukraine is a game-changer. Azerbaijan and the United States have to work hard to strengthen and protect the relationship. Who—other than the United States and Europe—will speak up strongly for the sovereignty and independence of Azerbaijan?

The Ukraine situation also demonstrates the importance of resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This conflict creates instability in the region that should not be taken advantage of by any party. The presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia need to work together to take concrete steps to resolve the conflict. It will also be tremendously difficult to accomplish resolution without the full cooperation of Russia. We will see whether that will be forthcoming.

We also support Track II efforts to build people to people contacts between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. These kinds of confidence building measures can help prepare citizens of both countries for peace. We are troubled by last week's arrest of well-known journalist Rauf Mirkadirov and the investigation begun on Monday of Leyla Yunus and her husband, Arif Yunusov. Leyla has been released after hours of questioning, but both are still under investigation. All three have been strong proponents of the Track II process and the Azerbaijani Government's actions will have a chilling effect on any contact between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. We think this is a mistake.

At the same time, we need to recognize that Azerbaijan has taken a courageous, independent course over the past 20 years, and—in many ways—it has been to the benefit of the United States. Azerbaijan has taken this course despite being in a very difficult neighborhood. Azerbaijan has and continues to cooperate tremendously on Afghanistan, by having sent troops there, allowing transit of non-lethal goods and equipment through Baku, and committing to assist the development of Afghanistan after the 2014 troop withdrawals.

PREPARED REMARKS

Azerbaijan has supported positions of the United States in the Security Council and United Nations General Assembly. Azerbaijan is one of the few post-Soviet states to vote for the resolution on Ukraine's territorial integrity. Azerbaijan has—for 20 years—undertaken an independent policy in the production and supply of its natural resources. Our cooperation and partnership continues to be huge in this area. This is even more important given the present Ukraine situation. We also have strong cooperation in the area of counter-terrorism and this includes working closely on the protection of energy infrastructure. I started going to Azerbaijan 19 years ago, and the progress is huge. Baku today is on a different planet from what it was then.

The elephant in the room regarding our relationship is in the area of democracy and human rights. We seem to talk past each other. We are who we are and hold strong democratic values. When we see what we think are abuses we speak out.

Azerbaijan bristles at the criticism. They cannot understand why they are criticized. They argue that Azerbaijan lives in a dangerous neighborhood and must maintain stability. They argue that they have done much to support us over the past 20 years and have made tremendous progress.

This is true, but the United States believes that Azerbaijan will have greater stability by allowing a more open society. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated while in Baku a few years ago, that the United States has its strongest relationships with societies that are the most open.

Democracy, human rights and the development of civil society are areas where we have to continue to work closely. I hope that the government of Azerbaijan will refrain from what we see as unnecessary actions that do great harm to individual people and create significant irritants in the relationship. Azerbaijan has a tremendous opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to democracy and democratic reform when it assumes chairmanship of the Council of Europe in May and implements the agreed Action Plan.

We have to work to understand each other better and to do everything we can to strengthen our critically important relationship.